

The Age of Enlightenment

By Sharon Fabian

You could say that the modern age really began in Europe in the 1600s. Around this time, people began to ask for proof before they were willing to believe something. No longer were they willing to accept something as fact just because it was what they were told. They wanted facts. They wanted things to make sense.

It was called The Age of Enlightenment, and its main idea was that humans had a very important power - the ability to reason. It was believed that this ability to reason would allow people to break away from the superstitious beliefs of the past.

It was a radical new way of thinking for many Europeans. For centuries, they had accepted the teachings of certain leaders. If the leaders said that something was true, then it was. At one time, that would have been the end of the story, but not any longer. Now people used their own abilities to discover truths for themselves.

Since all humans had this ability to reason, the Enlightenment philosophy led to a new way of looking at people as well. It led to the idea that all people were equal. Anyone could make important scientific discoveries, not just members of the noble class or members of the clergy. Also according to the Enlightenment philosophy, everyone has certain natural rights.

During this time, it was believed that the most important thing a person could do was to learn and discover more and, in this way, add to human knowledge. Important discoveries were made in science, history, and math. The Age of Enlightenment continued through the 1700s in Europe and also spread to America.

One scientist whose ideas influenced many of the Enlightenment scientists after him was Sir Isaac Newton. He may be best known for his three laws of motion, but Newton had many interests. He studied the planets. He was interested in optics and invented a telescope. He studied colors and prisms. He was one of the inventors of calculus. Whatever he studied, he used his powers of reason, and he looked for proof. Sir Isaac Newton used the scientific method that scientists still use today. He made predictions, he made observations and recorded his data, and he did accurate calculations.

In history, the Age of Enlightenment influenced the American Revolution and revolutions in many other parts of the world as well. The ideas of the Age of Enlightenment led to the French Revolution and other independence movements in Europe and Latin America. Age of Enlightenment beliefs, like the belief that all people were equal, led to the rise of democracy and capitalism. They influenced our own Bill of Rights.

Thomas Jefferson believed in the Enlightenment idea of natural rights, and we can see their influence in our *Declaration of Independence*.

Thomas Paine was another colonial American who believed in the Enlightenment philosophy. His famous pamphlet, *Common Sense*, reasoned that by natural rights the American colonies should be free from England.

In math, Newton's discovery of calculus was not the only major event. Another important milestone was the combination of two older systems of math - algebra, which had been used in Asia for centuries, and geometry, which had been used in Europe.

All of these changes came about because of the ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers. Two of the most famous Enlightenment leaders, in addition to the ones already mentioned, were Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Voltaire was a writer from France who used his wit to argue for civil liberties. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas influenced everything from music to the governments of the European nations. These modern thinkers led Europe and America into an age where reason, rather than superstition, ruled.



Name _____



Date _____

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Questions

- _____ 1. The Age of Enlightenment began in the _____.
A. 1600s
B. 16th century
C. 1700s
D. 18th century
- _____ 2. The main idea of the Enlightenment philosophy was that people had the ability to _____.
A. write
B. read
C. reason
D. believe
- _____ 3. One idea of the Enlightenment philosophy was that people were _____.
A. easy to convince
B. unequal
C. equal
D. divided into social classes
- _____ 4. The idea of natural rights can be seen in our _____.
A. congress
B. Declaration of Independence
C. Bible
D. colonial school books
- _____ 5. Sir Isaac Newton used a _____ method to make his discoveries.
A. scientific
B. superstitious
C. random
D. historical
- _____ 6. _____ discovered calculus.
A. Jefferson
B. Voltaire
C. Newton
D. Rousseau
- _____ 7. Enlightenment ideas influenced revolutions in _____.
A. North America
B. Latin America
C. Europe
D. all of the above
- _____ 8. The ideas of the Age of Enlightenment were _____ the ideas of the Middle Ages.
A. similar to
B. very different from
C. exactly the same as
D. none of the above



Date _____

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